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ABSTRACT

The effects of the actor-observer relationship (friendship or stranger) were tested to determine the attribution of responsibility for success or failure in a prisoner's dilemma game (PDG). Male subjects (N=80) participated, four subjects per experimental session. Two subjects competed in a non-zero sum, mixed-motive PDG while being observed by two other subjects. Each player was observed by only one observer, either a friend or a stranger. After 20 trials, each player and his observer assigned responsibility for the player's outcome. Observers who were friends to actors assigned more personal responsibility to the actor for success, and less personal responsibility for failure, than did observers who were strangers to actors. Actors who were observed by friends accepted more personal responsibility for success and failure than did actors who were observed by strangers. There are many implications for attribution theory and research. (Author/NRB)

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Its Effect on Actor and Observer Attributions

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, April 12, 1980 at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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Friendship: Its Effect on Actor and Observer Attributions

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(Paper presented at the meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, April 12, 1980 at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.)

Imagine that you are an individual who has just successfully completed a task. Your performance was observed by a friend or by a stranger. You are asked to tell how personally responsible you feel you are for the success. Would your self-attributions be any different for a success (or a failure, for that matter) which was observed by a friend than one which was observed by a stranger?

Imagine now that you are another individual who has just witnessed a person who is either a friend or stranger to you succeed or fail at a task. As an observer now, you are asked how personally responsible that friend or stranger is for his outcome. Would your attributions be any different for a success or failure of a friend, as compared to a stranger?

Essentially, these were the questions asked in the present research. The research began with the anticipation that, indeed, the relationship which exists between an actor and an observer would influence each's responsibility attributions for the actor's outcomes.

Predictions for observer attributions were based on research (see Bradley, 1978) which suggests that any variable which may make the observer feel closer to the actor, or feel more empathy for the actor, would cause the observer to see the actor's behavior favorably. It was assumed that a friend would feel closer to an actor than a stranger would. Accordingly, it was predicted that observers who were friends to actors would attribute more personal responsibility for the actor's success, and less personal responsibility for the

actor's failure, than would observers who were strangers to actors.

For actors predictions were based on research (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Weary, 1980) which indicates that variables which increase an actor's concern about future evaluation from observers would tend to make the actors more modest in their self-attributions of responsibility. It was anticipated that an actor would expect more interaction and evaluation from a friend than from a stranger. Therefore, it was predicted that actors who were observed by friends, would attribute less personal responsibility for success, and more personal responsibility for failure, than would actors who were observed by strangers.

Method

To test these predictions, it was necessary to use a situation where individuals could either succeed or fail at a task, while being observed by another person. The Prisoner's Dilemma Game (PDG) was chosen for this purpose.

Eighty male subjects participated in this research, four subjects per experimental session. Within a session, two subjects competed in a non-zero sum, mixed motive PDG. Two other subjects observed the players. Each player was observed by only one of these observers. The player and his observer were either friends or strangers to each other.

Choice combinations and payoffs for the PDG are shown in Figure 1. Each player could make one of two choices--Choice 1 or Choice 2. The payoffs for choice combinations are shown in the four quadrants of this figure. The top portion of the quadrant reveals Player 1's payoff for a choice combination; the bottom half of the quadrant reveals Player 2's payoff.

Players competed in 20 trials of this game. Then, after the 20 trials the player who had the highest score was declared the game's winner; the other player was declared the game's loser.

Subsequently, each player and his observer assigned responsibility for the player's outcome on 9-point, Likert-type rating scales. The end points on this scale were labeled "The Person," indicating a personal responsibility attribution, and "The Circumstances," indicating a responsibility assignment to the actor's environment.

Results

Data for actors and observers were analyzed separately in 2 X 2 (Dyad X Outcome) analyses of variance. The two levels of the Dyad variable were the Friend and Stranger relationship dyads. The two levels of Outcome were Success or Failure for the actor in the PDG.

The Dyad X Outcome interaction was significant for observer responsibility attributions. Comparisons of these means within this interaction (Figure 2) found that observers who were friends of actors attributed significantly more personal responsibility for the actor's success, and less personal responsibility for the actor's failure, than did observers who were strangers to actors. These results are consistent with our predictions for how friendship would influence observer attributions.

The Dyad X Outcome interaction was not significant for actor responsibility attributions. However, the Dyad main effect was significant. In Figure 3 it can be seen that actors claimed more personal responsibility for success and for failure when observed by a friend than when observed by a stranger.

Thus, the data indicate that actors' self-attributions are influenced by friendship with observers. However, the anticipated modesty that friend observers would produce in actors only occurred when the actors failed. Actors who were successful and observed by friends were quite immodest, claiming more personal responsibility for the success than did actors who were observed by strangers.

Discussion

To summarize and consider the implications of these results, for observers it was found that individuals who were friends to actors assigned more personal responsibility to the actor for his success, and less personal responsibility for his failure, than did observers who were strangers to actors. As noted, such results are consistent with predictions and with previous research. Aside from support of predictions, these results for observers are important because they are the first to occur from research which manipulated actual friendship between an actor and observer, had the actor experience success or failure in the presence of the observer, and subsequently found that friendship influences the observer's responsibility attributions. These data add considerably to previous research which has used role-playing techniques or laboratory-manipulated actor-observer similarity between strangers to demonstrate that factors, such as empathy, may influence observer attributions.

The actor's claim of more personal responsibility for failure when observed by a friend than by a stranger was consistent with predictions. However, the successful actor's immodesty when observed by a friend was not anticipated.

To try to explain this immodesty, it may be noted that Weary (1980) has recently found that actors who are observed when they

experience a positive outcome experience more egotism, a desire to present themselves in a favorable light, than actors who are unobserved. In the present research, then, successful actors who were observed by friends may have felt quite pleased that the friend saw this performance. They may have wished to maximally impress the friend (egotism), so as to have the friend feel that this outcome shows that they are worth a close relationship. The successful actor's immodesty may have then reflected an attempt to manipulate the friend's impression of his worth or value as a friend.

This research does have another important implication for attribution research. Considerable attention has been given to comparisons of actor and observer attributions. This emphasis was fostered by Jones and Nisbett's (1972) theory about differences which occur between actor and observer attributions. These comparisons have not accounted for the effect of the actor-observer relationship on each's attributions. The present research suggests that a complete accounting of actor-observer attributions must include considerations of the interactional effects between the two individuals.

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Figure 1

PLAYER 1		Choice 1	Choice 2
PLAYER 2	Choice 1	4 4	5 -5
	Choice 2	-5 5	-4 -4

Figure 2

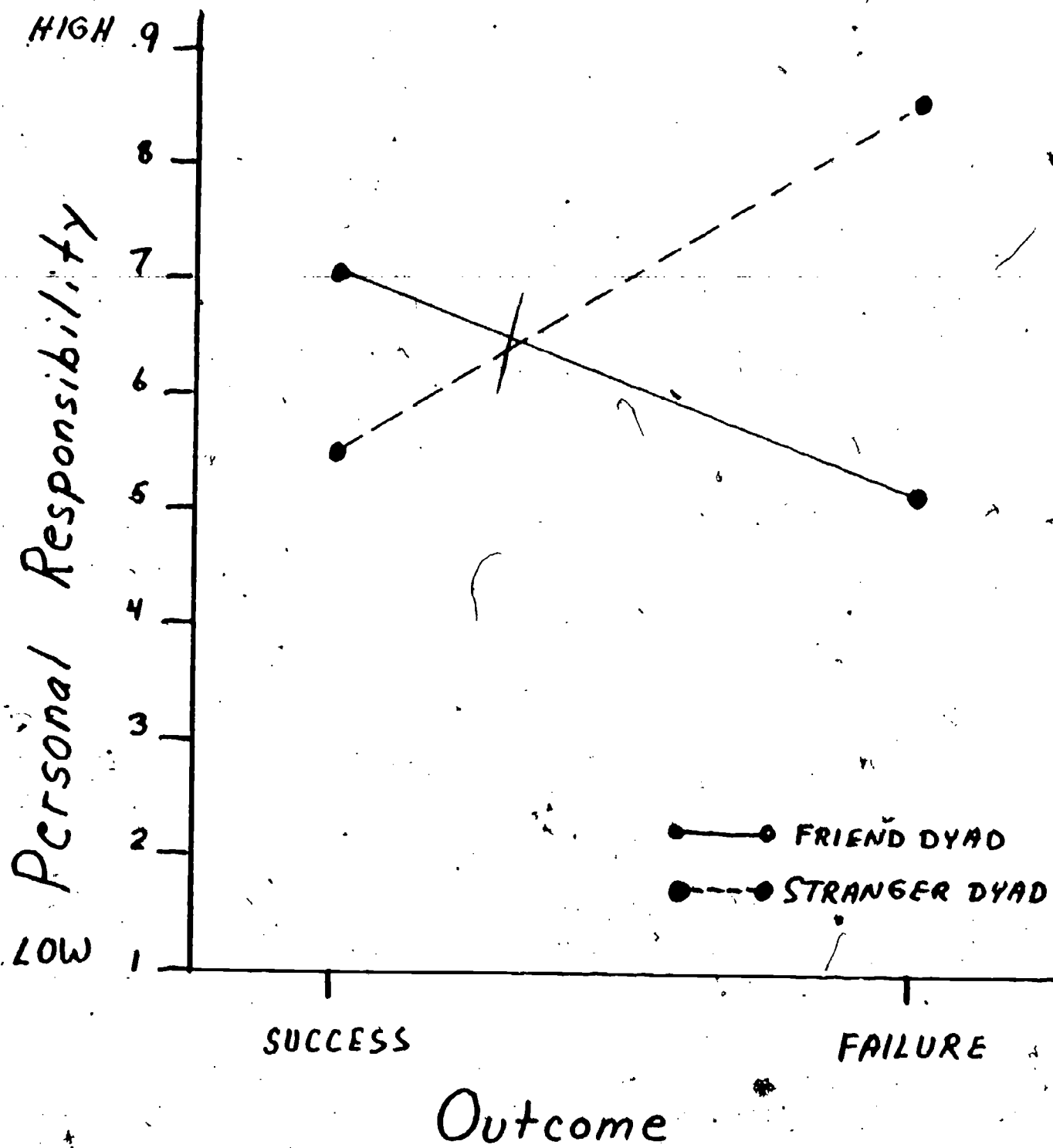


Figure 3

